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From Chaos Born: General Canine's First Charge to the NSA Workforce

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It had been born out of chaos – and necessity – this small, relatively unknown defense agency we know today as the National Security Agency, at a time when the U. S. Comint effort was a troubled sea of interservice rivalry, division, and duplication. A board headed by George Brownell¹ had been appointed by President Harry Truman in 1951 to investigate the U. S. posture on communications intelligence operations. It had issued sharply critical findings. The Armed Forces Security Agency, or AFSA, NSA's predecessor, had been able to accomplish only what the much disjointed efforts of the three service cryptologic elements had permitted. Among other things, the Brownell Board had determined that AFSA's status was little more than a titular head of the U.S. Comint mission and that this was seriously affecting the nation's capabilities in the intercept and processing of intelligence communications. Clearly, the answer was to realign the responsibilities of the U.S. Comint effort and consolidate all national cryptologic tasks under one agency. On 24 October 1952, the National Security Council issued NSCID 9, establishing the National Security Agency and assigning to it all responsibility for the communications intelligence mission of the United States. That directive was shortly followed on 4 November by a memorandum from President Truman which changed the name of AFSA to NSA and assigned all Comsec responsibilities to the Director, NSA.

The announcement of NSA's creation was to be made by the new agency's director, Lieutenant General Ralph J. Canine, in the early afternoon of 25 November to an audience of men and women, both civilian and military, in the theater at Arlington Hall Station. The men and women entering the darkened, richly decorated interior of the theater from the typically mild November day outside were a representative mixture of the approximately 5,400 civilians and 2,200 military personnel who were soon to become ex-AFSAers and new NSAers. General Canine, a robust and solid-looking man, was on the stage preparing to deliver the speech which would herald in a new era in American intelligence operations. His hands, which would soon assume their usual positions buried deep within his pockets, hung uncharacteristically exposed at his sides. He cleared his throat to begin.²

"Last December, December of 1951, Mr. Truman directed the Secretaries of State and Defense, assisted by the Director of CIA, to appoint a board to investigate the communications intelligence activities of the United States. That Board was chairmanned by Mr. Brownell from New York....

1. George Brownell was a prominent New York lawyer who also acted as a State Department consultant after World War II and served as President Truman's personal representative to several nations, including India and Mexico.

2. Excerpted from General Ralph J. Canine's speech to NSA employees, 25 November 1952.

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"That Committee made a very detailed examination of the communications intelligence activities of the Government, and it submitted its report to the special committee, the Secretary of Defense and State, in June of this year. The report was staffed in the State and in Defense and in CIA and finally approved by the Secretaries, and on the 24th day of October, Mr. Truman signed a memorandum which was implemented on the same day by the National Security Council, and Mr. Truman's memorandum and the National Security Council's directive now become the law of the land so far as the conduct of communications intelligence activities is concerned. That's somewhere on the order of ten months. That is pretty good for the Government, I think.

"On the 4th of November, Mr. Lovett³ signed an order implementing that directive on an interim basis and directed that the interested people in the Defense Department get together under the chairmanship of the Director and present to him a draft of something that he could publish to the people of the Defense Department to put the communications intelligence business on a fixed basis, as opposed to the interim basis of the directive of the 4th of November.

"That Ad Hoc Committee has reported, and the report desired by the Secretary is on his desk now. Now I have gone to some length to recap what has happened for one or two reasons. One of them is that inevitably it takes a good deal of time to do such things, and the second one is that some of the best brains of the country were brought into the solution of the communications intelligence problem. I paraphrase or semi-quote the first sentence of the President's memorandum in which he states that the communications intelligence activities are a national responsibility - a national responsibility. In line with that the name of the Agency which is the Headquarters, which is made the Headquarters of the communications intelligence activities of the country, was changed from the Armed Forces Security Agency to the National Security Agency. That's a rather important point and I ask you to keep it in mind. . . .

"Now as of the moment, the organizations which we now have for the communications intelligence activities of the United States are substantially as follows: We have the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense, designated a special committee of the National Security Council, charged with the general supervision of the communications intelligence activities. They have as their principal agency to set policy a revamped U. S. Communications Intelligence Board of which the Director of Central Intelligence is the permanent chairman, without vote, and on which State, Defense, CIA, FBI, Army, Navy, Air each have a representative, and of which the Director of the National Security Agency is also a voting member. That Board is charged with the overall policy determination for the conduct of communications intelligence. Operational-wise the Defense Department is made the Executive Agent by the President to conduct the communications intelligence activities. The National Security Agency . . . , within the framework of the Department of Defense, and the Director of the National Security Agency, appointed by the Secretary of Defense, is charged with the conduct of communications intelligence operational activities in addition to some other things, but that is fundamentally the problem.

"Now in order to make that effective, Mr. Truman did one very critical, crucial thing. He took all the Comint collection and production resources of the United States and placed them under the Director of the National Security Agency. By that means he then made the Director responsible for carrying out the national mission of the National

3. Robert A. Lovett served as the U.S. Secretary of Defense under the Truman administration from September 1951 to January 1953.

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Security Agency. In other words, by that manipulation they succeeded in pinning down the responsibility for the conduct of all communications intelligence activities in one guy so that they only got one neck to chop off, one guy to go up on the Hill when the next Pearl Harbor comes along. Well, that's simple for them, but I doubt that's just exactly why they did it. They can have my neck, if they want it, or whomever happens to be unfortunate enough to be Director at that particular time, but they have succeeded in pin-pointing responsibility and in tremendously increasing that responsibility of the Director and his assistants.

"... we expect to operate the Comint activities of the United States very largely based on the experience, the proved methods, the proved things that we know, that we have found out over a past period of years, provided they are still in point, provided they still apply. The world has changed somewhat since World War II, and we can't afford simply to lift what were, during World War II, proven methods, and say they'll work in 1955. We may. If they are, we'll continue to use them. If they aren't, we will get some new ones.

"Now not everybody in the United States approves what has been done. That's probably an understatement. . . . Some very bitter words have been passed back and forth over the Comint racket at one time or another. . . . Some of you people in here . . . have had one gob of these diverse opinions. Some of you have been on the other side and I suppose some of you have been in the middle. Some of you have been rather vocal about your opinions, maybe before you came to this Agency. Some of you had very fixed ideas. Well, that's water over the dam. You may have had them yesterday, but you haven't got them today. I mean that exactly. We've got something that's the law of the land, that's signed by the President of the United States and yesterday was yesterday. Tomorrow is tomorrow. We have got a lot of work to do here.

"So much for the chronology of the beginnings of the predecessors of the National Security Agency in our present position. One of the major serious defects that the Brownell Committee found with what was going on, the way the Comint activities were being operated prior to the 4th of November, was that there was a complete, almost a total lack of any provision for continuity in policy of the Comint organizations. Well, they took some rather, let me say, drastic steps.

"To begin with, the Director's tour . . . is a minimum of four years. That's a long time, and he can be reappointed, if he lives that long. One of the few specific points in which the Director is told how to run the joint, they tell him to appoint a civilian deputy who has the primary responsibility for conducting the research and development activities, assuring us of continuity on research and development, and we're negotiating for considerably longer tours for military personnel. We get civilians for, well, I don't know. How old is Bill Friedman?⁴ You know, that long.

"They have provided a rather effective means. It is a clever document, NSCID No. 9. They have provided a rather effective means for assuring that there is a continuity of policy in the National Security Agency and, through the National Security Agency, within the communications intelligence activities of the nation.

"Now what I have just told you, what is its impact on me? I was getting ready to leave you next July 15 and get stationed in California. What is its effect on you all? Well, the number one thing is that NSA or AFSA or whatever you want to think first is here to stay.

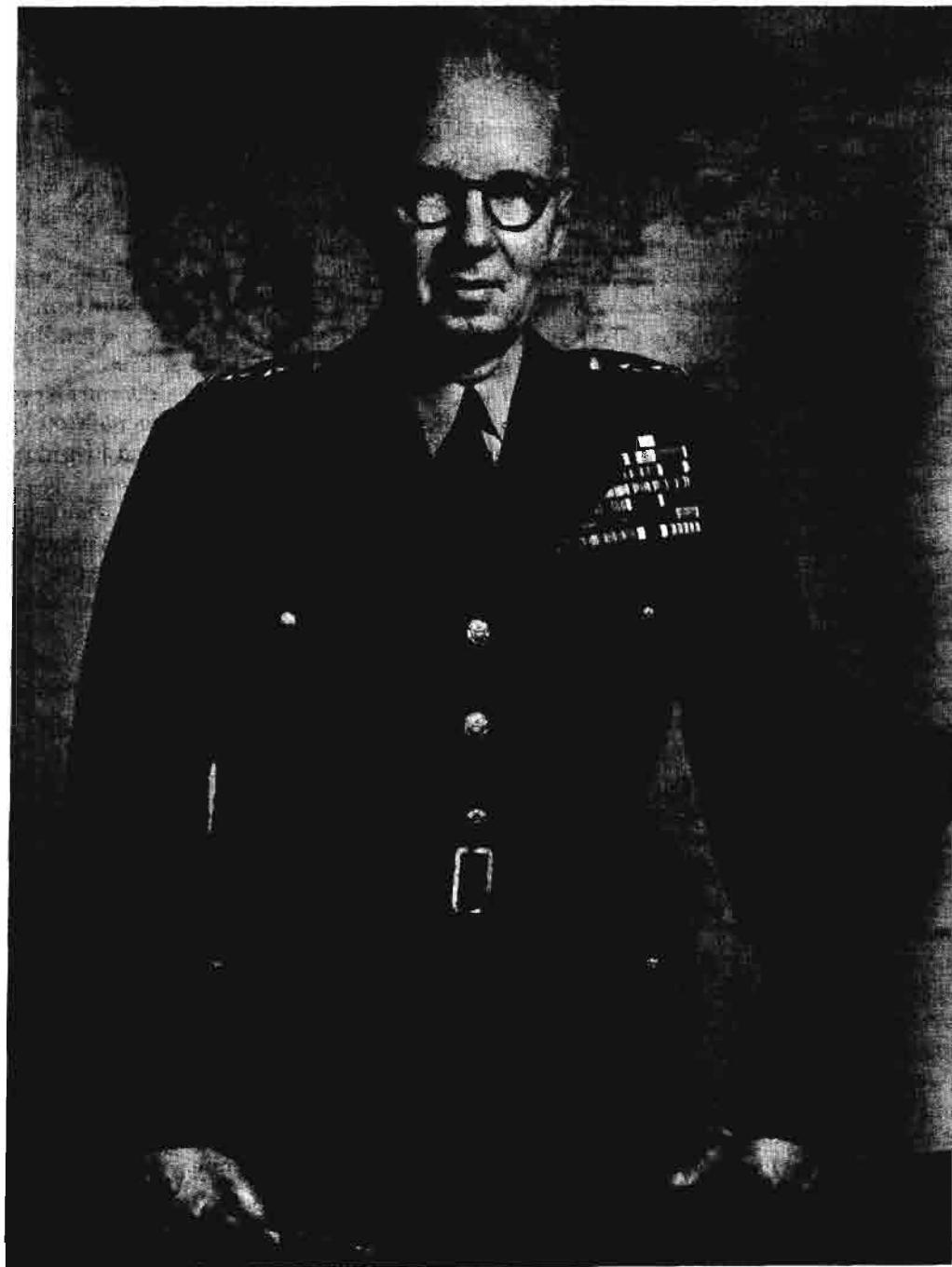
4. William F. Friedman, known as the dean of modern American cryptology, devoted 35 years of service to U.S. cryptologic activities. Appointed as special assistant to the Director, NSA, Friedman was the recipient of the National Security Medal, the country's highest award for contributions to national security. He retired from NSA in 1955.

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Lieutenant General Ralph J. Canine, USA

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There's going to be one. There will always be an NSA if we have to get the Marines to help us. . . .

"Now I guess this thing has been in effect since the 4th of November. Most of you haven't seen any changes. I haven't either. I come to work at the same time, go home at the same time, have the same amount of trouble getting on the street, Nebraska Avenue, out of the Station; but there are, in the long run you will see a considerable number of changes in the Agency, I hope. There are some things that aren't going to change, and I want to repeat some of them. . . .

"There is no change in the rule that we are going to fill the jobs with the person best qualified for the job, irrespective of the kind of buttons that the guy or gal wears. I repeat, we're going to continue the policy of filling jobs with competent people and when we have a vacancy, we will select the most competent available person to fill it, irrespective of the race, color, or previous condition of servitude. I believe in the Constitution. . . .

"Now another thing that we are not going to change, we are not going to change the policy that there is a career in this Agency for anybody that is in it. . . . If your bent leans toward bossing people, then get in the executive racket. If your bent is toward reading the minutes of the Polit Bureau, get in that. I am looking for some of those people.

"Now so much for that. Those are the two things that are important. We aren't going to make very many changes. We are going to make some changes. We are going to make some changes every so often but just to keep people from getting in a rut, but I think those are the two fundamental things that affect the careers Agency wide of all of you. . . .

"Now I have talked at length here and to anybody that'll listen to me out in the hutches of A and B buildings⁵ and in some of those places over at the Station about what my ideas were of running at that time AFSA, now NSA, and it is an astonishing thing that as few people as they do know what I have said. Now it is not only an astonishing thing but it is a terrible thing.

"A boss is only as effective as he is able to impress his own personality, his own desires, and his own whatever you said on the people that are working for him. Now in an outfit as large as this you can't go around and tell the same story to 10,000 people. This has been and is a military organization so we adopt the normal method of dissemination of information in the military organization. That is, I tell the guys that work directly for me. They tell the guys that work directly for them or gals on down until finally Susie Que at a typewriter clear back in the corner finds out what is going on.

"Now that is a fine system. It has one fatal defect. It has one fatal defect, and that is if somebody clams up and goes fishing instead of telling his people what his boss told him, they'll never find out except to listen to rumors. They'll never find out except to listen to rumors. Now it is beholden on you people, the executives and junior executives, not supervisors, of the Agency to see to it that the people who work for you know what the policies of the Agency are. If I walk into some hutch over here back in some corner behind a line of files and I say to somebody, "What did I say the other day?" and he doesn't know, I am going to start coming back up the ladder to [redacted]. How well this Agency is going to work will depend on how thoroughly, how much you people want it to work. It is just that simple. If you want it to work, you will sell it to the guys and gals that work for you. If you don't want it to work, why all right. Come in and let me know and I will get you a job with CIA. It's largely in your hands."

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5. A and B buildings were "temporary structures" built in the 1950s to accommodate the demands placed on Arlington Hall Station by the steadily increasing workforce.

6. Captain [redacted] USN, was at that time serving as the Chief of NSA's Office of Operations.

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